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ABSTRACT

Over the last three years, large numbers of workers have been losing their jobs and experiencing involuntary unemployment for extended periods of time, as much as two years or more. This is a situation that creates a tremendous challenge for career counselors. This paper begins by providing an historical, economic context for the discussion and then describes common effects of long-term unemployment on individuals and families. The authors also propose strategies for addressing these effects. Finally, different perspectives are presented that counselors may want to consider in helping clients negotiate the emerging world of work landscape. (Contains 12 references.) (GCP)

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Counseling the Long-Term Unemployed

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Counseling The Long-Term Unemployed

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Over the last three years, large numbers of workers have been losing their jobs and experiencing involuntary unemployment for extended periods of time, as much as two years or more. This is a situation that isn't going away, at least not anytime soon; it seems, rather, to be expanding daily.

People have suffered from long-term, sometimes chronic, unemployment before this; people with disabilities (including HIV), people who are homeless, lower-wage and less skilled workers, and those who have suffered from discrimination. Why is this story receiving such widespread attention now in the media? Perhaps it's because for the first time, so many highly educated, high-functioning workers have been affected, with the numbers concentrated among mid-career workers, college graduates, and executive, professional and managerial workers (Stettner & Wenger, 2003).

In any case, this creates a tremendous challenge for career counselors – how do we counsel clients in this dire situation? Our current approaches may not suffice to address this problem.

We will begin by providing an historical, economic context for our discussion and then describe common effects of long-term unemployment on individuals and families. We will also propose strategies for addressing these effects. And finally, we will present different perspectives that counselors may want to consider in helping clients negotiate the emerging world of work landscape.

Statistical, Economic Framework

Let's consider some statistics and economic trends described by government agencies and nonprofit think tanks such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Economic Policy Institute. Several factors have contributed to the current unemployment picture.

First, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research, the recession officially ended in November 2001 (Weller, 2003). Since then, as of June 2003, the number of jobs has declined by 1.2 million in

the private sector (Bernstein, August 6, 2003), with an average loss of 93,000 a month; by contrast, from 1995-2000, jobs were being created at an average rate of 241,000 per month (Bernstein & Michel, September, 2003). This is the first time since WWII that payrolls have continued to fall 20 months after the recovery began.

Second, as of June 2003, the national unemployment rate stands at 6.4% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 18, 2003). However, experts agree that this figure may be low because it doesn't take into account people who have stopped looking, are taking part-time or contract jobs, or are underemployed.

Third, as Economic Policy Institute President Lawrence Mishel explained in a presentation on April 27, 2003, productivity has increased by almost 1%, from 1.5% annual productivity growth prior to 1996 to 2-2.5% currently. Unemployment is affected by continued slow growth in the economy along with increased productivity in the workplace. In order to generate enough jobs to significantly lower the unemployment rate, the economy will need to grow more than 3.5%, possibly 4.5%, which is 2% above the average growth for this year.

Fourth, real wages (wages adjusted for inflation) for full-time workers are falling for the first time since 1990. According to Michel, declining real weekly wages will continue to hinder overall wage and income growth. The decline will impact consumption, which will contribute to impeding an economic recovery.

Individuals: How They're Affected and How We Can Help Them

What do counselors need to know about the psychology of job seekers who have been unemployed for an extended period? Let's begin with some examples.

Ricardo

Ricardo was a software engineer who'd worked at a Silicon Valley company for 13 years. He'd been there in the beginning of the rise of this once powerhouse company and enjoyed his options and stock gains, company parties and hefty salary. But, in his first counseling session, he said he'd actually seen the downturn coming a few years earlier. He wasn't surprised when his division was downsized and he was let go at age 47.

Ricardo thought he'd take some time off, relax, get to know his two sons a bit better and then move on. That was 26 months ago, right in the middle of the dot com bust. He never anticipated what would happen next. He discovered he wasn't as competitive as he thought he was. When

he applied for work, so did several hundred others who were similarly qualified. When he signed up for classes to develop new skills, he found that many of his job-seeking competitors were right along with him. What he experienced emotionally was typical of many long-term unemployed job seekers: shock, insecurity and anxiety. But his most recurrent feelings were depression and deep discouragement. He'd never failed at anything in his life, until now.

Margaret

Margaret was part of a "rebound program" designed for prisoners. She'd been a drug dealer and cocaine dependent, lost her children to Child Protective Services and needed employment to support herself and regain parental privileges. She'd been living with her sister and brother-in-law for 18 months and still hadn't found work. "Every time I tell people I've been convicted of a felony, they won't even consider me. Even when I lie, they have a way of doing background checks that catch me as both a jailbird and a liar. How can I ever get work?"

So how should a counselor proceed? Here's a type of checklist for helping discouraged workers:

Comparative labeling and low self worth. Long-term job seekers are highly sensitive to their circumstances and whether they've been prisoners, homeless, drug dependents or simply without work, they tend to judge themselves harshly. Typically, they contrast themselves with all other acquaintances, friends, and family members whom they see as more successful than they are. Counselors need to recommend a different benchmark and have them consider a comparative group that isn't so demanding.

Overwhelmingness and helplessness. Discouraged workers can feel overwhelmed and helpless because they can't change their situation easily. They seem to have lost touch with simple activities like setting goals and establishing daily targets. They need to feel empowered and to experience the search as manageable so they can jumpstart their activities again. Counselors may need to help with planning, time management, and setting simple, measurable goals using tools such as a basic flow chart.

Undervaluing accomplishments. Highly discouraged job seekers tend to undervalue any of their successes because they compare these to the supreme goal of securing meaningful employment. They need help acknowledging themselves for their efforts as well as their accomplishments – whether or not they are related to finding work – and determining what will provide meaningfulness and what matters in their lives.

Burnout and emotional depletion. Highly discouraged job seekers are often emotionally exhausted, cynical, lacking in a sense of personal accomplishment, and numb to other people's suggestions. Counselors can help them prioritize their activities, break up tasks into smaller components, be willing to compromise, and stay focused. They can also advise getting away from the search for a day, or finding other ways to gain a sense of control, such as through regular physical exercise or home improvement projects.

Hopelessness. Many clients express their hopelessness by claiming that they can't find work because they are too old, too young, too late, too early or too much in the middle. They purport to have the wrong education or poor experience, or claim they're not competitive. Counselors need to facilitate clients' understanding of where they learned this negative mindset and help them find ways to confront it.

What New Ideas Can We Offer?

Consider new income streams. Why not have clients consider three different part time jobs rather than a full-time job; and instead of looking for security, explore a project-driven approach. Have clients look for work that may only last a few months and take advantage of each project as an opportunity to develop professional contacts before moving on to something else.

Be a walk on. Clients can ask a company for a tryout, not unlike what college athletes do when they aren't given a scholarship to participate in an intercollegiate sport. The client will need to engage in research efforts to ensure an appropriate company is available.

Try apprenticeships. Similar to walking on, clients can consider serving as an apprentice. For years, people got many skilled jobs through apprenticeships. These can provide an organized format for training and mentoring.

Urge volunteering. What the long-term unemployed need most is a network base, and there's no better way of developing a new network than in volunteer work in a specialty area that's related to the worker's career choice.

Why not teach? Clients can look into teaching adult education classes in local communities and libraries, community college seminars and state university continuing education programs. These are terrific venues

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for individuals to assist others while building skills, continue to build a network, and get free marketing in the process. All of these venues offer catalogues and "flyers" describing the instructor, and these promotional pieces often go out to thousands of people.

Start a business. Many clients have skills to work as consultants and might find that their former companies would be willing to hire them as a consultant for 10 hours a week rather than as a full-time employee. Some hobbies can be turned into moneymaking ventures. We know of a barber who buys and sells model trains, and a dentist who creates high-tech yo-yos.

Return to school to develop new skills. Pursuing further education can help to establish feelings of goal attainment while providing a context to build a new network of contacts and some distraction from the demands of everyday living without work.

Counselors need to realize that they can't solve a client's problems. They should work as part of a team of people and entities that can give help and support. For example, the federal government's Carl Perkins and Workforce Investment Acts provide for career counseling services that can be used for job development, skill development, job seeking and job keeping activities.

Aside From The Client, How Does Long-Term Unemployment Affect the Family?

Long-term unemployment can be terribly destructive to families, creating emotional, financial, and even physical damage to a family unit. Its effects can be categorized into seven areas.

1. **Identity loss.** A client who loses a job often asks, "Who am I now? I used to be an engineer, my family used to be upper middle class, with those shared values." In a society that makes quick judgments about the relative value of people based on income and prestige, the loss of identity associated with a job can be wrenching. Counselors need to help people focus on their identities outside of work. What personal qualities do they possess? Are they good at singing? Do they enjoy hiking? What other interests or talents do they have?
2. **Change in roles.** It's not uncommon for a non-working spouse to return to work to support the family when the other spouse is facing long-term unemployment. This may create a dramatic shift

in traditional roles, and is often very difficult for both spouses, with guilt and resentment on both sides. The counselor should support the client in being able to communicate with his or her partner about the household division of labor. It's always the unwritten, unspoken expectations that seriously impact relationships.

3. **Shift in power structure and roles with the extended family.** Although for a short time the effects of unemployment usually remain within the nuclear family unit, they can quickly involve the extended family. Sometimes, especially in immigrant families, relatives will give or lend money or other resources, such as temporary housing. While this may solve immediate needs, it can also create problems such as resentment or jealousy. On the other hand, the extended family may refuse to help or have anything to do with the unemployed worker. Counselors should encourage clients to get a realistic, viable support system. If and when things get tough, clients can share the burden among several sources of support rather than depleting the reserves and patience of just one.

4. **Stress on the family unit.** With money scarce, family routines change. Different family members may have to cook meals, and the unemployed member can be very tense from day after day of looking for work (or not looking for work) and facing rejection. This creates enormous stress for the family, with tempers short and nerves raw from frustration and worry. This can trigger substance abuse or even physical abuse.
   Counselors can find out what community resources are available, including One-Stop centers, mental health and child care services, and benefits such as food stamps. People will take advantage of social services if they are presented in a sensitive and considerate way.

5. **Insecurity of children.** Children are very sensitive to their environment, and especially to the dynamics between their parents. If financial matters are aired constantly and negatively, children are affected. In addition, other children may ostracize them if they don't have the same toys or the latest video game. This elicits not only an incredible feeling of loss, but promotes anxiety that can interfere with a child's emotional development. It's hard to focus on the tasks of growing up when you feel your family's survival is threatened.
   Counselors should encourage adults to provide children with age

appropriate information. It's important to discuss the reality of the situation with them, and they might be urged to help by assuming additional responsibilities at home. As counselors, we need to be protective of children, even if they aren't our clients. Counselors may check in with family members to assure that children are receiving appropriate love and attention.

6. **Change in status among peers.** Though related to identity loss, status reflects income from a job whereby expenditures may be made toward clubs and other leisure activities. With money short, these luxuries are often eliminated. When social activities that provided emotional support are curtailed, it can seriously impact the family's functioning. Counselors should have their clients research activities in the newspaper or on the Internet that are low cost or free, such as free entrance night at local museums.

7. **Possible extreme lifestyle change.** After many months of long-term unemployment, a family's situation can become especially grim. At this point people may sell assets or transfer children to tuition-free schools. In some cases people may become homeless. Even if it doesn't reach that point, the emotional strain of a downwardly mobile lifestyle is very hard to handle. It's upsetting for people to realize that they won't attain their parents' lifestyle, an expectation that was instilled as a value for them. Counselors should discuss with their clients core family values and expectations to help them make their own peace with their difficult circumstances.

Changing Perspectives

Will long-term unemployment remain a constant? Will we go back to the work world of pre-dot com? Or will the world of work and how we work change? What will be the next big thing? How will all the jobs that have been lost be replaced?

As career practitioners, given the possibility that anyone may experience long-term unemployment, how are we going to help our clients think about work and career? What tricks do we pull from the bag to give them hope? Do we need to take another look at the transition models we've been using? Do they take into account the full range and depth of emotions that a protracted period without work can engender? How, if at all, will the role of career counselors change? What follows are some ideas and perspectives that have emerged as a result of asking these questions.

The data suggest that workers in California, as well as the entire country,

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are facing a crossroads. Outlined below are three criteria that all workers, including the long-term unemployed, consider when choosing work. Workers have an opportunity to re-examine their workplace needs, how they approach work (or their workstyle), and the world of work from which to choose their career direction.

1. Workplace

Currently, many employers expect employees to do much more with fewer resources, creating increased pressure and stress. Restructuring the workplace means establishing one that reflects the needs of both workers and employers. What will career paths in organizations look like? How will professional growth be supported? How will employees have flexibility and quality of life, currently described as work/life balance?

2. Workstyle

The restructuring of workstyle means that finding stability will take different forms, including generating multiple income streams, dual career parents taking turns at work, and focusing on project based work or the work that needs doing.

3. World of work

Restructuring the world of work, as a result of overseas outsourcing, increased productivity with technology, and downsizing, means finding new ways to create work. What are the jobs and careers that will be continuously available and how do we help clients create work?

We propose two specific approaches to meeting the needs of 21st century workers. The first is to focus on inculcating a *sense of power* within our clients — to encourage them not to abdicate their power at work or in other parts of their lives. The second is to apply *an existential frame to thinking about work that incorporates the world at large* and how individuals (our clients) want that world to be. How can folks apply these two approaches in their search for engaging work, keeping in mind workplace, workstyle, and world of work criteria?

Through the self-assessment process, clients gain a sense of power along with self-knowledge, which can provide them with the confidence they need to more easily communicate their needs, skills, talents, etc. to a boss or potential employer. For our clients who are employed, being able to cogently articulate how a lateral move will benefit both the employer and the employee promotes a sense of power. For the unemployed, it is particularly important that they hold onto their power so they can persevere in the protracted job search and comfortably communicate their strengths and skills, despite disappointments. Employees who

believe in their own power will more likely make direct and sustained changes in the workplace. For example, by actively promoting flexibility in the workplace, employees could introduce a more productive work environment, one that enables them to better manage family concerns, including children and aging parents.

Clients who feel empowered will find new workstyles – ways to work – that contribute to stability and an enhanced quality of life. For example, having multiple income streams can contribute to stability by providing continued income if one income stream is lost. Clients who have many talents and skills may find several different outlets, each one benefiting from a unique skill set. For example, counseling, writing and teaching aerobics represent three random skill sets that could provide three separate avenues for income. Here's another perspective. Because couples often act as partners in both work and home, each partner may trade off working at the office and providing child care – which would possibly have an impact on traditional career paths. Many couples are already experiencing this reality due to lay-offs. But what if couples planned their work this way?

As our clients look to the world of work to determine their career options, we suggest they take this a step further by considering the issues or problems that they believe to be important in the world at large, and apply their talents to helping resolve those problems. This is an approach that might emerge during a discussion of values or interests – helping clients try on an existential lens and focus on the work that needs doing. Considering problems (whether they be global, local or national) could help our clients retain their sense of individual power in the world, and have an impact where they want. This doesn't necessarily mean doing non-profit work for a small salary! It is simply another frame with which to look at career choices. In his book, *Not Just Another Job* (1992, pp. 81-83), Tom Jackson suggests an exercise that promotes this way of creating options.

In addition, as we look to the future, other views of the work world will derive from new alliances forming between different industries. An example, the Apollo Project, an alliance of 10 labor unions along with environmentalists, is a plan to back a 10-year $300 billion research plan to promote energy efficiency and reduce dependence on foreign oil. It's expected to preserve manufacturing and construction jobs, improve the public infrastructure, and be good for the environment by promoting sound energy technology (Greenhouse, 2003).

Finally, changing demographics and technology will promote new career opportunities for our clients. Longer living seniors, aging baby boomers and future generations will need new and different services. The burgeoning Hispanic community throughout the US, the integration of the

gay and lesbian communities, and the reality that we are, indeed, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-racial society, especially in California, are trends that will provide new career opportunities. And, of course, emerging technological innovations will continue to create opportunities for the future.

It's clear that with this slow economic recovery, changes in work have begun. Long-term unemployment is a part of these changes. As career counselors, it's important that we stay open and look for new ways to help our clients find engaging and satisfying work where they can feel some sense of stability, security, and empowerment in uncertain times.

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